A Small Patch on My Contract

Jonathan Lethem

uit didn't wake me until we were in orbit around Halfgone. As usual, he woke me with an orgasm. My consciousness swam out of stasis through a murk of erotic images, my nipples and clit humming as Suit peeled away to create a little airspace. Suit didn't make a window, but I didn't need one to know we weren't on ship any more. I gasped, drawing in my first unassisted breath, and, as the pleasure of orgasm passed, the discomfort of waking from stasis took over. My muscles ached, my throat was dry, and my head was filled with snot. I snorted, coughed it up, and let Suit deal with the mess. "Jesus, Suit..."

I tweaked my nipples to try and bring the pleasure back, but it was no go. "Shit." Why weren't we on ship? Where were we? "Something to drink," I croaked.

Suit extended a dripping tube and I sucked it. Soda water with lemon, my usual, only now I wanted something sweet. "Juice," I gabbled, water dribbling across my face. Suit extended a spongy tendril and cleaned me up, at the same time switching the water to guava nectar. When I was out of breath I bit the tube closed.

"Explain," I said. "But make me come again, too."
Suit dropped down around the curve of my stomach,

and at the same time dropped a headset over my shoulders and began a little science lecture.

Remember about the Godballs? he wanted to know. "Yeah," I said. "Those lumps of flesh — they dream things, right? And they're endangered, there's only a few left."

They dream the universe, said Suit. Very important. Only anti-entropic force ever discovered. Source of all existence.

"Oh yeah," I said, and then Suit did something that made me add: "Mmmm."

We're going to protect one against an Assassin. Remember them?

"I guess I cut that class," I said sarcastically. I hate it when Suit gets patronizing.

Every Godball has an Assassin, eventually. That's why they're dwindling.

"Has an Assassin ever been stopped?"

Never

I tried to fake a yawn, but then Suit made me come.

Ten minutes later Suit opened a window and I watched as we plummeted towards port. The research station looked like a single unburst blister on the ruined surface of Halfgone.

There were three men inside, according to Suit, and

they were the three remaining human beings on the planet.

rouble started the moment we touched down. When the airlock sealed above us the lights in the port went out. Suit kept me sealed up, not trusting the air, and threw out a single beam from my forehead, like a miner's helmet. I located the station entrance and took a few steps towards it before a laser beam hissed out a foot ahead of me, about chest-high. Suit threw me to the ground and grew turrets, and his light went strobe. He would time his movements to coincide perfectly with the blackouts, and the enemy, whoever that was, would perceive me as a teleporting armoured tank.

In this case, I saw, I was fighting the three scientists I was supposed to be helping protect the Godball. Well, hardly fighting any more. Each armed, they were pressed up against the interior walls of the airlock, blinking in confusion at the strobe. "Don't kill them," I told Suit. "Give me a speaker out."

Suit dropped a mike over my mouth and I said: "Shoot again and you die." Suit boomed it out in a voice that must have rattled their eyeballs.

One of them yelled: "Tell us who you are."

"Clothes," I whispered to Suit. He shut off the light and shrank away the body armour, leaving me in a tight-fitting bodysuit with a weapons belt on my hip. The extra material became a luggage trunk on wheels at my side.

Once I was dressed Suit had me glow, very gently, all over, so they could see me. "Delia Limetree," I said. "Didn't you get a message?"

"I – we thought you were the Assassin," said the first one, the one who'd yelled. There was a dark patch of sweat under both arms of his jumpsuit. "We thought the message was a trick."

"Nope," I said. "You're luckier than that." I picked up the rest of Suit and nodded at the door, and the men stumbled after me wordlessly, fumbling at the locks on their weapons. I could see a panicky glaze of adrenalin in their eyes; these weren't ordinarily men of action.

"Desani and Sons owns the lease on my Suit," I explained. "I was shipping back from a bodyguarding stint at a corporate summit with the Mound Builders. But somebody thought I could do some good here, apparently, and requisitioned the lease. I launched offship about half an hour ago — only been awake for about fifteen minutes. Don't know how the hell I'm

mystery, but not being part of it. That was it. I wouldn't die in the fire of unknowing, but I would always know of the mystery behind all things.

I pulled out my pocket knife and recut the spring's true name in the sign. I threw three handfuls of earth over the body of the fallen dancer. Let the natural order reclaim what belongs to it—just as the unnatural fire which sets artists apart had reclaimed its share. I drove my white Chevy pickup back to town. There was nothing to connect me with the ranger's death. I thought about the ecstasy in the faces of the dancers. I hadn't drunk from Castalia. Silander was right. The Nine are neither friends nor enemies of mankind. But in my mind how the spring glistens.



Don Webb, unlike most of the other writers represented in this issue, has been published in *Interzone* many times before: "Rhinestone Manifesto" (issue 13), "Djinn" (issue 41), "Reach Out" (issue 49), "The End of the World" (issue 52), "Not of This World" (issue 56). He is one of the more individualistic citizens of that other planet known as Austin, Texas.

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